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C O N F I D E N T I A L MANAMA 001907

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SUBJECT: SENIOR BAHRAIN OFFICIAL ARTICULATES CONCERNS RE REGIONAL SHIA AGENDA

Classified By: Ambassador William T. Monroe. Reason: 1.4 (b)(d)

11. (C) During a December 26 meeting with the Ambassador, Minister of Industry and Commerce (and confidant of the King) Hassan Fakhro asked about the recent elections in Iraq. When the Ambassador responded by discussing the many positive aspects of the elections, including the overall large turnout and strong participation by Sunnis, Fakhro observed that so many questions about irregularities have been raised in so many quarters, including by the Iraqi election commission itself, that it seems unlikely these allegations are coming out of thin air with no foundation at all. And the allegations contribute to continuing questions and concerns about Shia intentions in Iraq.

12. (C) The Shia actions in Iraq, Fakhro stated, are also fueling concerns about broader Shia goals in the region. He said that the bottom line for Shia in Iraq, Lebanon and Bahrain is that they have the majority of the population and thus should take command. He didn't blame them for wanting to take control; they do have some legitimate grievances. In the Islamic world as a whole, they only constitute 10 percent of all Moslems and in many places are considered non-Moslems. Discrimination against Shia in Iraq began back in the 1920s, when the British relied heavily on Sunnis. Shia in Bahrain and Lebanon have faced problems.

13. (C) The Shia response, Fakhro maintained, has been a coordinated effort to increase their numbers. During his lifetime, he said, he has seen a dramatic change in the sectarian composition in Bahrain. In 1938, Shia comprised just 22 percent of the population. The percentage has crept up one percent or more every year, the result of a deliberate effort to encourage large families. A similar population dynamic is taking place in Lebanon. He repeated that he took the point that the Shia have some legitimate grievances, but there is also an agenda to maximize numbers, with the ultimate aim in certain countries of becoming a majority and using that majority to assume control.

14. (C) He said that concerns about the broader Shia agenda in the region add to apprehensions about Iran and its intentions. While ruling out a military solution, he stressed that "we really have to find an effective way to contain Iran." He stated his concern that a strong Shia presence in Iraq will only lead to a stronger and more vocal Iran, which will put the U.S. and its friends in the region under pressure and in a corner. "And can you imagine what would happen if Iran gets nuclear weapons?"

15. (C) Comment: What is striking about Hassan Fakhro's comments is that he is not a Sunni extremist with an anti-Shia agenda. He is a Western-oriented official who was educated in the U.K., worked for an American oil company in the U.S., and is married to a British woman. He is a moderate senior official who has been involved in the effort to bring the leading Shia opposition society -- Al-Wifaq -- into the political system. But he reflects an apprehension among many mainstream Sunnis in Bahrain about the ultimate Shia agenda, a concern fueled by Shia gains in Iraq, provocative rhetoric from new Iranian President Ahmadinejad, and aggressive tactics by Shia activists in Bahrain who are rejecting Al-Wifaq's expected decision to participate in the 2006 parliamentary elections and are taking to the streets to voice their complaints against the government. The government will try to walk a fine line in the coming months as it encourages Shia to participate in the 2006 elections while dealing with the "provocations" of Shia activists and the apprehensions of many Sunni in Bahrain about the long-term goals of the majority Shia population.

MONROE